



BUSINESS IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK ON VIRGIN ATLANTIC

[Applied Industrial Placement]

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to analyze the management's effectiveness at Virgin Atlantic. The report will focus on how Virgin Atlantic have managed during the COVID- 19 pandemic and how actions taken by the company have affected employees, customers and the overall reputation of Virgin Atlantic. Within the report, there will be an internal and external examination and then an evaluation on management, marketing and shareholders. A comparison of other aviation airlines and Virgin Atlantic's competitors will also appear within the report.

The importance of the main findings within the report will identify the key skills that Virgin Atlantic have or lack and to evaluate this, there will be an internal and external examination that will evaluate the actions of Virgin Atlantic before and during the pandemic.

Besides, there will be several theories included as a comparison to see how the company is run and if this has impacted the decision making of management at Virgin Atlantic. Furthermore, discussion on management, marketing and shareholders at Virgin Atlantic will be included to gain an insight into the environment of the company.

Alongside this discussion, a comparison of competitors and other aviation companies will follow on for the purpose to see if progress has been made at Virgin Atlantic or to see if the company is struggling. A conclusion will be included at the end of the report which will state if the company have managed effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Firstly, the Coronavirus is a group of viruses that cause diseases in animals, in a few instances, some viruses including Covid-19 have been transferred to humans. Newey, (2020).

Additionally, GOV (2020), as of Tuesday 16th June 2020 over two hundred and ninety-eight thousand people have been infected by the virus and almost forty-two thousand individuals with positive Covid-19 results have died. However, the New York Times have stated that globally 15.3 million people have contracted the virus and Six hundred and twenty-four thousand deaths. Furthermore, The UK has been in lockdown since the 23rd of March. On this day Prime Minister Boris Johnston (2020) addressed the nation and stated that "The Coronavirus has been the biggest threat the nation has seen in decades and that everyone should stay home". In addition to this, he stated that the purpose of this lockdown was to ensure the high risk and vulnerable were safe and to relieve stress on the NHS. Furthermore, Newey (2020) stated that on the 23rd March Covid-19 was declared a pandemic

However, according to Boffey, (2020) The World Health Organisation has criticised the partial lifting of lockdown in England and if it is to continue, there will be a second peak in the virus whilst Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland still have strict lockdown restrictions in June 2020. In addition to this, for a successful lifting lockdown, a vaccine will need to be introduced or the Government will need to enforce a tracking operation. Finally, Boffey states that lockdown has been enforced for twelve weeks and it is uncertain when it should be lifted.

Virgin Atlantic is a prominent long haul airline that was created in 1984 by Sir Richard Branson as stated by Singh, (2019). Virgin Atlantic (2020), have stated that Richard Branson created the airline as there was a gap in the market for a stylish, exciting airline that provided great in-flight service. In addition to this, the company has stated that this was successful as they now fly long haul to a variety of destinations including America, Africa and Asia. Moreover, Burrows, (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic employs around 10,000 throughout the UK including pilots and cabin crew, and call centre agents in Crawley and Swansea.

Main Findings

PESTLE

Political

The first political factor that has occurred due to the coronavirus is that the government has had to introduce a furlough scheme as mentioned by ACAS (2020). In addition to this, it has given a definition which states that furlough is when employers have to put employees on temporary leave however they stay employed. According to Dawkins (2020), this worked in Virgin Atlantic's favour as the company had asked its employees to take 8 weeks unpaid leave to relieve financial stress from the company before the job retention scheme was put into place. He also stated that fortunately those who agreed to the unpaid leave were entitled to furlough.

Additionally, the UK government has ensured that there are limitations now that individuals can travel as stated by Coffey, (2020). This includes wearing masks throughout airports and aircraft, limiting queues for toilets and some airlines will refuse hand luggage. Virgin Atlantic, (2020) have stated that aircraft are cleaned after every flight with a solution that has proved to kill viruses and additionally all staff on board an aircraft are supplied with cleaning products, especially during long haul flights.

This suggests that management at Virgin Atlantic were not financially prepared for the pandemic which would have harmed the employees if the UK Government did not introduce a job retention scheme.

Social

A social factor considered during the coronavirus is that when an individual's environment changes it is only natural to feel unsafe and uneasy Ren (2020). Ren additionally stated that due to the uncertainty of the coronavirus, close-minded attitudes gather and rumours evolve. In addition to this, it is stated by Ren that racism within social environments will increase. Not only are the innocent citizens from Wuhan targeted but the whole of China have also seen blame. Furthermore, Kelvin (2020) has also mentioned that it is evident that all eyes are looking towards China during the pandemic, However it is stated by Kelvin that individuals should not forget about developing countries and those working at the frontline of the virus, instead of pointing the blame toward innocent citizens of China.

However, according to Virgin (2020). Many grounded employees have dedicated their time off to volunteer within their communities, whether it's for the NHS, supermarkets or charities. This therefore reflects Virgin Atlantic as a company and shows how compassionate employees are.

This proves that Virgin Atlantic work within a hierarchy system and those employed at the lower-paid jobs have had more time to give to their communities due to less commitments during the pandemic.

Economical

The global economy has seen a huge hit during the pandemic especially with the amount of individuals who are now unemployed according to Inman (2020). Inman provided the statistics from the jobcentre, which saw a 126% increase since the beginning of lockdown. In addition to this, the current number of people unemployed and claiming work-related benefits is now 2.8 million and Inman has predicted the number to increase as it is inevitable for all businesses. More information on redundancies at Virgin Atlantic will be provided further on in the report.

Virgin Atlantic were not economically prepared for the impact of this pandemic. Additionally, according to The Guardian, (2020) the aviation industry suffered immensely after the "9/11" terrorist attacks. This includes Virgin Atlantic who had to make 1,200 redundancies due to it. Therefore the management of Virgin Atlantic has been poor since the company has had almost two decades to prepare for a hit to the aviation industry.

Technological

Technology is a vital factor to restore global tourism and build confidence for customers, Pololikashvili, (2020). The global guidelines provided by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation expects the technology will provide a safer travel environment for customers. However specific technology has not been mentioned.

Moreover, Virgin Atlantic saw a decrease in customers due to travel bans, however, innovation was born and on the 23rd March 2020, Virgin Atlantic underwent the first cargo-only flight to maintain the trade of goods to and from the UK as stated by Oakes (2020). Furthermore, Davies (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic have adapted and shipped out 3.5 million items of protective equipment for the NHS. These items include ventilators and facemasks. Therefore this suggests that the management at Virgin Atlantic have been keen to adapt facilities to support other organisations.

Legal

One legal factor that has arisen from the Covid-19 pandemic is that business contracts need to be adapted in regards to employment as mentioned by Perkins (2020) In addition to this Perkins has stated that companies need to consider whether their employees are a liability within the workplace environment, whether the company have policies in place if the workplace becomes affected by the virus and whether their employees can work from home.

On top of this, businesses throughout the tourism industry will need to adapt after the impacts of the virus to maintain consumer rights according to Baum (2020). Additionally, Baum has stated that the majority of businesses will have to

reshape to survive the impacts of the virus. More information on the reshaping of Virgin Atlantic will be included within the marketing title.

Environmental

Due to lockdown restrictions, the travel industry and especially COVID-19 affected areas will receive the greatest decrease in travel-related transmissions stated by Chinazzi (2020). In addition to this, Ng (2020) has provided an example with Venice, Italy. It is stated that the city is choked by pollution with cloudy, grey canals. However due to lockdown and no tourism Ng has stated that it is apparent the city's break from tourism has seen magnificent benefits from clear canals where small fish and swans have been spotted for the first time in years.

On the 17th March, The UK Government (2020) issued travel restrictions that advised to travel only if it was necessary. However, according to Virgin Atlantic, the only flights that were taken during this period were respiration flights to the UK provided and funded by the government. This suggests that the lack of emissions of all outbound flights contributed to a decrease of air and noise pollution. Management of Virgin Atlantic has not commented on the environment during the pandemic which suggests that it is currently not a priority.

SWOT

Strengths

Although with uncertainty ahead, Virgin Atlantic has used its facilities to its advantage to provide health services with the equipment it needs as stated by Davies (2020). Alongside this Davies stated that 3.5 million personal protective equipment items have been flown in from China to the UK on specific cargo flights from Virgin Atlantic. In addition to this, the manager of the cargo flights provided by Virgin Atlantic, Dominic Kennedy (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic is working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to transport over 100 tonnes of medical supplies between Shanghai and Heathrow.

This heightens the idea that the cargo management of Virgin Atlantic has used the pandemic to their advantage to continue to use the facilities of the company.

Weaknesses

Virgin Atlantic is committed to safeguarding its future due to Covid-19 and compared to other airlines, the company has assured that redundancies will be the last resort. Virgin Atlantic, (2020). The company has also provided steps in action to reduce redundancies made which include a company-wide recruitment freeze and restrictions on staff travel and training other than safety training which will continue. Alternatively, Brady (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic has had to make the sacrifice and cut 3,000 jobs to ensure the airline adapts to the coronavirus crisis, this includes cutting the company programme in Gatwick and integrating the company with Virgin Holidays.

Despite much effort to avoid redundancies, the management at Virgin Atlantic have had no choice. However, the integration of Virgin Atlantic Holidays shows

managements from both companies have been lucky to support each other to avoid administration.

Opportunities

Virgin Atlantic was introducing a route between London Heathrow and Sao Paulo expanding services provided by the company as stated by Caswell (2020). Alongside this Caswell states that the route was announced to begin in March 2020. However Caswell mentions that the route was postponed for October 2020 and then cancelled completely. It is stated that the route could potentially be reintroduced once the business is back on its feet.

On the other hand, Topham (2020) states although Virgin Atlantic have struggled during the pandemic the company have announced starting dates for the 20th July with more routes to restart in August. Furthermore, Otley (2020) states that Virgin Atlantic is optimistic about the future and have released plans for routes in 2021. Otley provides a statement from the company which explains that routes to Tel Aviv will double daily and flights from Heathrow, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast will continue to provide routes to popular destinations such as Orlando and Barbados. Otley mentions that the summer schedule will begin March 2021 and will gradually increase throughout the year.

Notably, this goes to show that Virgin Atlantic are progressing post-pandemic whilst seeing interest for flights which could potentially see flight schedules return to normal next year.

Threats

As part of adapting post-COVID-19, Virgin Atlantic has decided to suspend all services at Gatwick Airport for the foreseeable future as mentioned by Davies, (2020). Adding to this, Davies states that a spokesperson for Gatwick Airport has stated that the coronavirus has had a severe impact on the aviation industry and therefore Virgin Atlantic will be welcomed back to the airport if opportunities arise. However, Finlay, (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic's presence in Gatwick Airport was low compared to other airlines. It has been stated by Finlay that EasyJet had the highest amount of seat capacity in February 2020 at 38%. In addition to this, Finlay mentions that low budget airlines like Wizz Air may increase their slots at the airport and plan to make Gatwick a base for the airline.

Overall, this suggests that the services provided by Virgin Atlantic at Gatwick Airport will not be missed and that the management decision could see a struggle with the company.

Management

There are a variety of managing theories that could be applied to Virgin Atlantic. Francke, (2014) has stated that management is all about making decisions despite how complex the situation is. Additionally, Francke mentions to be successful at decision-making problems and consequences need to be addressed. Furthermore, Mintzberg, (1990) believes that there are ten roles for successful management. These are categorised into the interpersonal category, informational category and decisional category.

Virgin Atlantic was voted within the top twenty of the best companies to work for in 2017 Krapivin, (2018). In addition to this, Krapivin stated that it was noticeable when observing employees of the company due to how engaged they were when completing tasks. Alongside this, he has stated that factors that influence engagement could be financial gain or motivation between groups all of which would reflect the effectiveness of the management at Virgin Atlantic.

Whereas, Richard Branson requested a £500m loan to support Virgin Atlantic however this has been criticized due to Richard Branson's net worth according to Taylor (2020). Likewise, Forbes (2020) has predicted his net worth to be \$3.8 billion. In addition to this, Horton states that Branson has more interest in leaving a legacy rather than focussing on his airline. Furthermore, Horton states that as Virgin Atlantic has seen losses the past five out of seven years, Branson is not willing to put money into the company as it is unlikely the money will be returned. However, Calder (2020) has stated that Branson has stated that the money put into the company by the government is not free and therefore he has the responsibility to ensure it is paid back.

Similarly, Weber's theory on bureaucratic management is unlike the flexibility of modern management, Weber provides 6 characteristics that form a bureaucracy as stated by Peek, (2020) These are hiring based on qualifications, accurate record-keeping, consistent rules and a "separation of the owners personal and organisational assets". This theory may be compatible for Virgin Atlantic considering that Branson's net worth has been separated from the company.

However, according to Keeley, (2020) Virgin Atlantic stopped all flights to mainland China, specifically Shanghai at the start of February. Therefore proving that management of Virgin Atlantic made the responsible decision before the virus becoming a pandemic.

It is evident that Weber's theory is appropriate for Virgin Atlantic for a variety of reasons which include Bransons separated assets and the hierarchy system that decided on reshaping the company and that redundancies were inevitable.

Management Comparison

The competitive advantage is becoming prioritised as there is an increase in countries that are trying to make tourism the new economic generator, Vodeb (2012). Also, Vodeb stated that destinations need to adapt towards the tourism market and that well-represented companies have the power to increase a country's attractiveness to tourists.

Virgin Atlantic and British Airways have a similar cabin system with and both company's unique selling point is the service rather than price as stated by Lovegrove (2019). However, it is mentioned by Lovegrove that British Airways provide more European routes and more consistent long haul routes and therefore could be at a slight competitor advantage to Virgin Atlantic. Despite this, Calder, (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic has always been ahead of its time by being the first aircraft in Europe to introduce in-flight entertainment and premium economy, class. Furthermore, Calder has stated that if Virgin Atlantic were to go into administration, it will have over a monopoly to British Airways. This, therefore, reflects Virgin Atlantic's importance as it sets a benchmark for the British long haul carriers.

British Airways are under immense pressure and have also suspended operations in Gatwick Airport according to Davies (2020). Brader, (2020) has also backed this argument by stating that British Airways is set to make 12,000 redundancies whereas Virgin Atlantic only made 3,150. This is because of additional European routes British Airways have on offer. This suggests that Virgin Atlantic is managing as effectively as possible since its competitors have acted similarly.

However, Ireland (2020) has stated that budget airline Easyjet started flights to a variety of destinations throughout Europe in June whilst Virgin Atlantic restarted routes to Hongkong and New York mid-July (Taylor, 2020).

This goes to show that the aviation industry has been able to adapt post-COVID-19. The reshaping of Virgin Atlantic Holidays reflects how the company has been ahead of its time despite having less facilities and routes than British Airways. However due to the company being a long haul carrier it has been unable to restart services compared to budget airlines which may suggest that budget airlines have seen the competitive advantage within the aviation industry.

Marketing

Firstly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies five areas of needs of the majority of individuals and is a foundation of marketing for most companies. Thompson, (2019). In addition to this Thompson describes the hierarchy system, the bottom of the system is basic needs followed by psychological needs and with self-fulfilment at the top of the system. Thompson states that to market successfully one or more of these need to be addressed.

One of many adaptations Virgin Atlantic have had to consider is the integration of Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Holidays mentioned by Brader, (2020). However, Brader has mentioned that this has also resulted in a loss of jobs from both companies including the closure of 15% of retail stores.

Furthermore, Bhasin (2019) stated that Virgin Atlantic has stated that the marketing strategy is to ensure that customers get immaculate customer service. This then suggests to potential customers that the company's services are expensive. However, Virgin Atlantic's competitive pricing strategy then provides relief compared to prices from competitors such as British Airways.

However, According to Campaign Live, (2020). Virgin Atlantic have not adapted a marketing campaign since before Covid-19 whilst other Virgin organisations such as Virgin Media have had a stay connected campaign suitable for those in lockdown.

Comparing Virgin Atlantic's marketing campaign with Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that the management of Virgin Atlantic have not considered advertising services post-COVID- 19. Following Maslow's theory, it may suggest that customers of Virgin Atlantic may consider other aviation companies to fulfil their needs as their needs have not been met by the company.

Shareholders

A company with a variety of shareholders is seen to be a property of those involved as stated by Freeman, 1994. In addition to this, Freeman states that shareholders have been developed to solve specific problems.

Virgin Atlantic has a total of thirteen subsidiaries that all participate in key decision making for the overall company and has fifty-nine corporate family connections as stated by Bradstreet (2020).

Richard Branson sold 31% of Virgin Atlantic to Air France- KLM for £220 million whilst Delta has shares at 49% and Virgin Group have maintained 51% of shares. according to Topham (2017). Alongside this, Topham states that the purpose of this was to integrate more routes between the companies whilst keeping the Virgin Atlantic brand. Otley (2020) has stated that Virgin Atlantic has been searching for new shareholders due to the Coronavirus. In addition to this, it has been stated that although Delta Airlines own 49% of the company the CEO Ed Bastian (2020) has said that ownership of the company does not mean further support will go towards Virgin Atlantic. One factor that may have influenced this decision according to Horton (2020) is that Virgin Atlantic already owes Delta \$200 million.

Moreover, Richard Branson requested a £500m loan to support Virgin Atlantic due to lack of funding from shareholders as stated by Taylor, (2020). According to Powley (2020), founders of Rolls Royce and Airbus are in favour and have written letters of support to the Government stating the effects on both companies if Virgin Atlantic receives no financial support.

Additionally, the CEO of Virgin Atlantic, Shai Weiss (2020) provided an update stating that a five-year restructuring plan has been put into place with the help of financial support from shareholders and has introduced new partners Davidson Kempner Capital Management. In addition to this, Weiss stated that the restructuring package will be worth £1.2 billion to ensure that service is up to standard which will support and be beneficial to the UK economy.

Following Freeman's theory, it is apparent that Virgin Atlantic is compatible with what Freeman has stated. Branson being a shareholder of many Virgin companies reflects Freeman's thought of shareholders viewing companies as property.

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident throughout the report that the management at Virgin Atlantic has had to make a variety of decisions and sacrifices to sustain the company post-COVID-19.

Firstly, some ways that Virgin Atlantic had to change include integrating with Virgin Holidays and becoming Virgin Atlantic Holidays. The sacrifices that came along with this decision includes a fifteen per cent cut of Virgin Holiday stores and a cut of 3,150 jobs at Virgin Atlantic. Furthermore, all routes have been suspended from Gatwick Airport including the use of any Virgin Atlantic lounges. This gives the insight that the management at Virgin Atlantic were not prepared for circumstances that could affect the aviation industry. However despite this, due to sister companies and shareholders Virgin Atlantic have used this to their advantage to survive significant losses due to the coronavirus.

Additionally, comparing Virgin Atlantic to competitors British Airways suggests that the company could not have done anything to prepare for the pandemic. Due to travel restrictions made by the UK government, both companies were unable to manage without making redundancies and due to being long haul carriers, have only been able to begin routes to limited destinations from mid-July. However comparing the Virgin Atlantic to budget airline EasyJet proves that budget airlines are currently at the competitive advantage due to short-haul flights and reasonably priced last-minute deals, considering the majority of individuals have been unable to work during the lockdown. Therefore, management at Virgin Atlantic are currently working to the best of their ability however if short-haul flights were introduced beforehand then the company may have been able to recover sooner.

Nevertheless, management at Virgin Atlantic have not considered marketing during the pandemic which may have prolonged uncertainty for customers or may have even enraged customers due refunds. It may have ensured a quicker recovery from losses however the money spent on advertising during this time may seem irresponsible and insensitive considering redundancies made. Furthermore, having shareholders within the company set Virgin Atlantic at an advantage as the Government refused to give the company any loans and by having shareholders resulted in the company receiving a £1.2 billion restructuring package.

Finally, comparing the management of Virgin Atlantic to a variety of theorists proves that the company is bureaucratic and is successful at decision making alongside shareholders. All of which have resulted in decent actions made by the management despite trying to prolong redundancies that would have been inevitable.

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